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The Lone Adventurer

by

STANTON A. COBLENTZ

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PART I

IN THE COURT OF THE KING

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

—TENNYSON, "Ulysses."

I

For him who would forget awhile the noise
Of careworn cities, drenched in sweat and steam,
And leave the feverish quest and sultry joys
To walk the slopes and pinnacles of dream
(Pale slopes the modern holds in small esteem),
There may be treasure rich as miser's gold
In some quaint legend of the lands of old,—

In some forgotten legend of a day
Before this age of cinders, coal and steel,—
Such legends of the strange and far away
As sundry late discovered tomes reveal,
Which, held for scores of centuries under seal,
Tell of an eastern kingdom, long renowned,
Whose very name is now an unknown sound.

II

Beyond what seas no pen shall ever teach
And past what mountains we can only guess,
A world-commanding empire used to reach,
Bounded by mapless leagues of wilderness.
August as Rome, in power scarcely less,
It trained its conquering valiants, horde on horde,
Ere first the Latin warriors drew the sword.

And not alone in might of arms it led
But in the stancher might of peaceful ways.
Helmud, its greatest sovereign, courted praise
Less as a mail-clad, crimson Prince of Dread
Than as a man of whom it might be said,
"He was a friend of Knowledge and of Art
And gave us songs to heal the wounded heart."

And in fulfillment of this high desire
He reared gay courts and temples, crystal-halled,
Castles with windows bright as eyes of fire
And rainbow galleries, arched and marble-walled.
And lordlier still was his own palace, called
The House of Flowers, since it knew the graces
Of half a million living flower faces.

And on those corridors, the livelong day,
Under the roof of veined and vaulted glass,
A low, sweet music as of lutes would play,
While courtly dames and cavaliers would pass,
Butterfly creatures of the royal class,
Who danced and chattered, and with loud acclaim
Lauded the goodly Helmud's deathless name.

All praise and reverence were Helmud's—yet
His bowl of joy ran never to the brim.
A world was at his knees—but one regret
Often in secret made his eyes grow dim,
And when the midnight silence closed on him
Sometimes his gaze would seek the stars in vain,
Craving mute solace for an untold pain.

He grieved for one, the eldest of his line,
The prince Lodalga, who in later years
Should pour out oil in the ancestral shrine
And rule when Helmud left to join his peers.
But this strange lad, in face of threats and tears,
Seemed not to hear the imperial summons call,
And scarcely cared to be a king at all.

A sad, shy youth, he loved the wooded ways,
And loved to rove the palace park alone,
To watch red sunsets smoldering out in haze
Or walk where ragged moonlit fountains shone.
But he could see no meaning in a throne,
And held that bird or bluebell might create
Marvels to shame the purple pomp of state.

"Oh, let me know the world, the fields, the stars.
Still lakes and leafy solitudes!" he cried.
"Let perfumed lords be drawn in golden cars,
Breathing the incense burned before their pride.
But I would wander where the high winds ride
On houseless prairies, far from all the thralls
Hedged in this wilderness of marble walls!"

And Helmud, hearing such rebellious speech,
Would smile a bitter smile, and sadly say,
"My son, the gods have placed within your reach
Honors for which the millions vainly pray.
And would you cast them pebble-like away?
A world is at your bidding—why ignore
The jeweled wealth it washes to your shore?"

And many were the wiles that Helmud used
To train Lodalga in the princely arts.
"Come, study how to hurl the battle darts
And wield the sabre!"—But the youth refused,
Pleading, "The craft of arms is much abused,
And there are myriad things I'd sooner know
Than how to drive a rapier through a foe."

Then Helmud, angered but not wholly wroth,
Directed, "Let us try a milder training.
"I'll send you, on a noble mission, forth
To some far kingdom, where a rival's reigning.
And there, a friendly fellow spirit feigning,
You'll put our vassals on the throne, and be
Conqueror by adroit diplomacy."

But once again the fractious youth demurred.
"What matter if our empire wane or grow?
The eternal stars shall circle round unstirred,
And, when our palace ruins crumble low,
The wind shall rustle past, and shall not know.
And kingdoms dead, and kingdoms yet to come,
Shall be as dust beneath Time's careless thumb."

III

Sad-eyed and gravely puzzled, Helmud now
Sought his advisers in the council room,
And in slow troubled phrases told them how
His son was still reluctant to assume
The sword of state. Then all sat bathed in gloom,
And long, with maundering lips, they schemed and
schemed
How the insensate prince might be redeemed:

Till one, the sagest of the party, said,
"Let youth itself, O Sire, become your aid.
Dismiss your gray-haired councillors; instead,
Go seek some glittering-eyed and comely maid.
With each coy tossing of her prankish head
She'll have more power to mould and rule the lad
Than all our laws and mandates ever had."

"Good!" cried the king. And, closing the debate,
He bade his emissaries scour the land
To find some peerless lady as the mate
Of Prince Lodalga. . . . Soon, at his command,
Proud maidens, plumed to win the prince's hand
Went trailing through the throne-room, one by
one,
While Helmud sought the fairest for his son.

And fair were they as visions poets tell
And lovers dream in secret. Not a few
Could boast the gift of royal blood as well,
Which made them queenlier in the monarch's view
And in the end the king selected two
Who by their arts and beauty might essay
To wean Lodalga from his witless way.

And that the pair might charm with conquering
light,
Dazzling the youth to be their lord and thrall,
Helmud concealed them from the prince's sight
Till an appointed feast and royal ball
Which, in Lodalga's name, he chose to call,
So that, in gala mood, the wayward son
From the two maids might choose the Matchless
One.

Baron and princess, priest and battle lord,
Streamed to the palace on the festal day.
And, bright as autumn-painted leaves, they poured
Into the state-room, where the drums made gay.
Then on the silken sofa-rugs they lay,
While gold-plumed eunuchs, in obsequious line,
Stood waiting to bestow the meat and wine.

High in their midst, each on an emerald throne,
Waving a peacock fan with languid grace,
The honored ladies like twin pheasants shone,
Bird-like of posture, flower-fair of face.
"Oh, to be stationed in their happy place!"
Many a maid in secret envy said.
"Oh, that the prince might smile on me instead!"

Meantime the king, ere yet the feast began,
Surveyed the lamp-hung halls in high content,
Laughing with all, a blithe and gracious man,
Till in the end for the young prince he sent.
Then quickly died the monarch's merriment.
"Lodalga"—so the servant's message ran—
"Would like to come, but don't believe he can."

"He can—and must!" roared Helmud, with a frown
That made his slaves crawl trembling out of sight.
"Is it Lodalga then that wears the crown?
And dares he question if my ways be right?
Then let the thunder arrows blind and smite!
Go, call the scapegrace!—say we'll speak alone
In the closed court-room just beyond the throne!"

And, scowling like a lightning-laden cloud,
Helmud withdrew; and, searching out his son,
He spoke, in tones imperiously loud,
"Freedom, Lodalga, is no thing to shun,
So be not foolish—let my will be done!
But can it be you'd have the hardihood
To quench the lamp I've lighted for your good?"

"It is not hardihood," the prince denied.
"Father, I grieve if I must cause you pain.
Yet I would sooner bid you toss aside
My very life, like sand-dust lost in rain,
Than let you take the soul of youth in vain
By choosing, with a void and alien glance,
To thread for me the rose-lanes of romance.

"Not that your chosen dames may not be fair
Or merit not a worthier prize than I.
But could I hold them precious? could I stare
With them, night-haunted, at the starlit sky?
Oh, should I not, grown desolate, pine and sigh
To rove with some unknown through violet bowers
When March winds waver round the apple flowers?"

"Be not misled, my son," King Helmud urged.
"I too was young, and well recall a time
When lovelorn visions like high billows surged,
Then sank to ripples, till the smoke and grime
Of daily life filled all their luminous clime.
Bubbles will burst where stonier truths commence—
Come, join our party like a lad of sense."

"I shall not join!" the stubborn prince exclaimed.
"To meet the damsels face to face would be
A fruitless torment both for them and me!
Oh, father, though you had me lashed and maimed
I could not join, for I should be ashamed
To make a worldly offering of my heart
And for your pleasure play the dastard's part!"

The king turned speechless. Long he glared and
glared
At the rash prince like some devouring foe,
In ominous silence. Then his fury flared
To words of lightning. "Choose the way you go!
Not mine the failing if this callous blow
Be fitly punished! In your rooms you'll stay
For seven weeks, nor leave them night or day!

"Nay, more! It's time your heedless ways be done,
Time that you find some bold imperial aim!
And when your long confinement ends, my son,
Your follies too must end!—and you must name
Some object worthy of your princely fame
And of your coming kingship. Else, I fear,
We'll have to try some treatment more severe!"

So threatening, King Helmud left the youth,
And, striding to the feast-room white with ire,
Reported, not the flat and shameful truth,
But that a fever burned the prince like fire.
And so he promptly bade the guests retire,
Then, calling to his guards, fiercely he swore
Lodalga must not pass the palace door.

IV

So for long weeks the prince remained confined,
Locked in his gilt and damasked rooms alone.
Yet empires were explored within his mind,
And he traversed the trackless and unknown,
And thus found little leisure to bemoan
His own bleak fortune, since he sought the key
To the closed secret of man's destiny.

He wondered, as in moody hours before,
Why he was born the scion of a king,
And what the purpose of the life he bore
More than the purpose of the birds that sing
Or of the flowers briefly bright in spring.
A flash, a flutter, and a forlorn sigh—
And other lives like wind-motes whirling by!

"Oh, for a glimpse beyond the utmost veil
Into the cloud-rimmed meaning of it all,
Why men, like blown leaves, balk a scattering gale
Or batter lifelong at an unseen wall
Till one surmounts it and a thousand fall.
And all for what? Would courtesan or slave
Slumber more soundly in a prince's grave?

"And all for what, for what?" With wondering eyes
The youth inquired of sunlight, storm and rain.
"Why do torrential griefs and longings rise
Like April freshets to engulf in pain
The thirsting heart? Oh, why, if life be vain?
And whence do fiery exaltations spring
As with dim prescience of some deathless thing?

"There must be meaning we have not divined,
Some purpose in the flowering of the rose,
Some hidden light in cloud-peaks, thunder-lined,
And in the spirit's most remorseful throes,
Some gleam of beauty that no mortal knows,
But that secretive time may yet unbare
For him with eyes to see and will to dare.

"And may the fortunate seeker not be I?
May I not glimpse the fire behind the dawn,
Read the red lettering of the twilight sky,
And learn the living speech of wood and lawn?
And may my spirit not at last be drawn
Into some lonely height where Knowledge lies
Like a blue open plain before my eyes?

"Gladly for this I'd dedicate my days,
Risking my youth on deserts parched and dead,
But so escaping the soft, courtly ways
That close in darkness, with no light ahead.
Father, forgive me if the path I tread
Be not your path, for sooner would I die
Than seek no more the eternal Whence and Why."

V

But how to seek, not less than how to find,
Still was a vexed enigma, for there seemed
To be no answer in the questing mind,
And from the fog-strewn world no answer beamed.
And though he pondered, agonized, and dreamed,
The longed-for vision failed him, till one day
A lucky chance appeared to point the way.

THE LONE ADVENTURER

Wearying of the long monotony
Of wall-bound life, the prince contrived at last,
By golden bribes, to win the palace key;
And through the portals in the dawn he past
When guards were few and watched with eyes
downcast;
And, grayly mantled in a peasant's gown,
Stole like a beggar through the stately town.

And past the royal park, and round the woods
And out along the clattering common road
Where laden ox-teams creaked with jeweled goods
And plodding camels bore a human load,
Lodalga, with a nomad's freedom, strode,
Breathing deep breaths of the clear morning air,
And whistling low the death-note of despair.

And long he hummed a merry tune, and long
Held to the highway, though the hot sun blazed;
Then, where swift waters made melodious song,
He paused to rest, and watched some sheep that
grazed,
And with the music of calm thoughts he praised
The wide, blue mystery of the world, that brings
Joy to the beggar past the joy of kings.

VI

Now, at the haven of that wayside stream,
A fellow traveler came to chat awhile,
A tall gray man, with iron eyes a-gleam,
Yet with a light of magic in his smile.
His raveled garments showed how many a mile
Of road had seen his footprints; and his beard,
Like his dense hair, hung grizzled and unsheared.

He told Lodalga of the golden lands
Close to the sunset's border, where the sea
Made organ thunder on melodious sands
With wind and wave in vocal harmony;
And he depicted valleys wild and free,
Cloud-girt and wooded, where sharp mountains rose
In the white radiance of unmelting snows.

"Oh, that I might go seeking realms so fair!"
Lodalga cried in rapture. "Tell me, friend,
Are not perchance the secrets hidden there
Of mortal life, the meaning and the end
Of all these sad and querulous days we spend?
Surely, by chartless peaks and unplumbed seas
One can decipher ageless mysteries!"

"Would that I knew!" the wanderer gravely said—
"But who can know?—And yet there runs a tale
That if you travel on a sunset trail
Over the far green plain, and straight ahead
To where the ice-bound crags reach gaunt and dead,
You may, with fortune, learn the Why and How
Of all the riddles that perplex you now.

"High on the highest peak of all the range,
In a chill fastness far from human sight,
Walled from the ruinous touch of Time and Change,
There is a pool that sparkles mirror-bright.
And he who peers in it, and sees aright,
May catch a phantom gleam, a flash of wings,
And read the hidden meaning of all things."

"Oh, how to find that pool?—oh, stranger, how?"
Pleaded the youth, in rising ecstasy.
"Answer, where are those mountains?—for, I vow,
The eternal secrets must be learned by me!"
But the old man nodded dejectedly.
"Be not too sure, my lad! For aught we know
There is no pool upon those peaks of snow.

"I too have sought for it, and sought in vain;
I too have trudged the lone, ascending track
When knife-edged boulders tore my feet with pain
And whirling snow-winds howled and drove me
back.
You who are young may have the power I lack
And so may conquer—but I feel at times
That pool is where no mortal ever climbs."

The wanderer fumbled for his staff, and rose.
"O Youth, be not so blind as I," he said.
"Trail no mirages of the cloud-hung snows."
And he went shambling off with weary tread,
While the young prince, with hot and reeling head,
Slowly retraced his way to court, like one
Whose eyes catch glory from the rising sun.

PART II

THE ESCAPE

I

The vision would not leave him. Days went by
And still he brooded on the wondrous tale
Told by the vagrant. Often he would sigh
To take the solitary glacial trail
Into the topless crags. "What though I fail?
All agonies and dangers must be dared
Before one meets the Ultimate unbared!"

But wounding doubts would burn into his mind.
"Why grasp at flames that candle-like may flee?
Is it not best to dwell with humankind
On the warm plain, nor waste one's years to see
The ice-veiled secrets of eternity?
Perhaps the pool lies not upon the peak
But in the valley, where the millions seek."

Yet always some opposing fire would flare.
"Not so! It's only on the snow-capped height
That one may trace the vision and the light;
And the elusive pool must glimmer there.
I too shall seek it. Life were cold and bare
Without the flash of some far-sparkling hope
To draw one, hungering, up the long gray slope."

And day by day, both in his wakeful dreams
And dreams of sleep, the prince would turn his eyes
Into those mountain tops where spectral gleams
Tell of the mysteries men in vain surmise.
And, mutely pleading to the midnight skies,
Fiercely he promised, "I shall go, shall go!
With those blue peaks above, what meaning here below?"

Such was the purpose that inspired the prince
When his long lonely weeks at last were done,
And when King Helmud, eager to convince
Of full forgiveness, called to see his son.
"Lodalga, your allotted time is run,
And you've had ample chance to think, and plan
Some life-course worthy of our royal clan."

"I've planned indeed, O Sire," the youth replied,
"And crave your favor to indulge my whim."
And, while the sovereign listened solemn-eyed,
His son, by passionate pleas, acquainted him
With the weird pool upon the mountain's rim.
But Helmud's face was flushed with sullen flame
When he divined the lad's adventurous aim.

"No son of mine shall scale the crags!" he swore.
"A prince's place is on the plains and seas!
And would you, moonstruck, wander evermore
In the mad quest of rainbow mysteries?—
You, who should rule the State's realities?
Oh, come, my son, renounce this child's romance
And train yourself to wield an emperor's lance!"

"An emperor's lance, my lord, is frail as down,
And meteor flickers have a firmer might!
Oh, I would feel impelled to sink and drown
In the world's stagnant waters, if no bright
And beckoning vision called me to the height.
Circled by cloud-walled peaks of death and fate,
How can I walk the lowland roads of State?"

Shaking with wrath, the monarch turned away;
And, striding to the judgment room again,
Summoned his sagest councillors, to say
The prince still scorned the common paths of men.
And all heaved deep and mournful sighs, as when
War was announced or legions slain; and all
Believed Lodalga lost beyond recall,—

All except one, the eldest of the band,
Who coaxed and pleaded for the prince, "O Sire,
Be not alarmed. I think I understand.
The lad but overflows with ardent fire
For that romance which youthful hearts require
And that adventure which not seldom leads
To golden conquest and heroic deeds.

"So be not harsh. Humor his errant ways.
Let him set forth upon the longed-for quest.
What if he quaffs a drink of life?—'tis best
That he should pay the forfeit all youth pays.
Returning from his wanderings, he will praise
His father's wisdom—and will laugh to scorn
His ancient follies as a cloak outworn."

"True!" said another. And a long debate
Followed with many a rancorous hit and thrust.
Some held the plea disloyal to the State
And some believed its purpose far too just,
Before the king decided, "All, I trust,
Will grant to madcap youth its fiery crown—
So let the prince disport himself as clown

"And wander like a maniac through the land,
Till by degrees his roving wits return.
But to protect his name, we'll say he's planned
To fight some far barbarians, and to earn
The battle laurels that no king may spurn."
And so the sovereign called his son, and bade:
"Make ready; seek your magic pool, my lad,

"And I'll provide a royal retinue,
Camels and slaves, an arrow-bearing guard,
Foodstuffs and chests of gold, to bear with you
So that your journey be not over-hard.
You need not hasten—but I'll hold you due
Back at our court within a year or less,
Bearing rich trophies from the wilderness."

"Not that, O father!" cried the prince, amazed.
"I crave no trophies—silk or precious stone.
I burn for wealth whereon no man has gazed;
I seek the shadow-haunted and unknown,
And if I find it, I must seek alone.
So hold me not ungrateful, to report
Your generous offer would avail me naught."

"A madman's ravings!" roared the king in wrath.
"Some fiend or devil prods you with sly goad!
What! would you stoop to walk the common path,
And dare the perils of the common road,
And house yourself in some rude slave's abode?
Why, one would almost think you scorned your birth
And valued not your princely pride and worth!

"So if you cannot make the pilgrimage
With regal escort, make it not at all!
Truly, my meanest chambermaid or page
Has less the mood and spirit of a thrall!
Oh, son, why do you turn my life to gall?
Back to your rooms! Nor leave them till I say!
'Twill give you leisure to reflect and pray!"

II

And so Lodalga suffered new restraint
And paced once more his silken jail alone.
But once again he did not make complaint,
And did not take the trouble to atone.
Instead, he thought, "Let others have the throne!
My only crown and citadel shall be
Far on the peaks that front eternity!"

And now the longing for the mountain top
And the far adventure, came with fiercer power.
And, by a long rope, he essayed to drop
Out of his prison at the midnight hour.
And, lithely swinging from the black-walled
tower,
He found himself before the palace gate
Where sabred sentries, slumbering, lay in wait.

Then, like a shadow in the moonless dark,
He passed the drowsy guard, and made his way
Over the wall, and from the royal park
Into the town, through alleys blank and gray,
Out to the lonely highroad. When the day
Blinked wanly in the east, ten thousand paces
Severed the fleeing prince from princely places.

At dawn he paused, and changed his purple gown
For peasant's costume, and for pence and bread;
And, clad in hempen cloak of dusty brown,
With horsehide boots, and veiled and turbaned
head,
And shirt all patched with ragged green and red,
The prince resumed his course, without a doubt
The king's pursuers could not search him out.

Nor did they find him. Time on time he saw
Helmeted couriers pressing hotly by
With brisk inquiries. But he would withdraw
Into some thicket, safe from ear or eye,
And listen to some peasant drawl reply
That none in purple robes or princely crown
Had passed this highway from the royal town.

Evening beheld him, like a truant child,
Couched on a lonely haystack, leagues from home.
The sky, a burning ocean many-isled
With reddening clouds, had spread a mottled dome
Over his head, as though to bid him roam;
And a strange peace and gladness filled his breast,
Calm as the twilight star that twinkled from the west.

He felt like one that newly learns to live;
Like one, long fettered, that at last is free;
Only as vagabond and fugitive
Could he behold the whole world's majesty.
"O Life, keep not your plains and stars from me!"
He cried in wonder. "One is most a king
Where the bold gale drives past on chainless wing!"

Such were the thoughts that filled him many a day,
With the wide fields of the wide earth before.
Into the setting sun he held his way
Over the billowy prairie's boundless floor.
Sometimes he feasted at some plowman's door,
Sometimes he earned his bread with ax or hoe,
Sometimes he famished, and his hopes ran low;

Sometimes he plunged through night-storms and the rain
Or huddled in dim stables near the sheep;
Often he forded rivers, or would creep
With watchful eyes across some marshy plain,
Or thresh his way through smothering clumps of cane,
Or in some forlorn gulch or rocky glen
Stare in the steely eyes of highwaymen;

And thorns beset him, and the wild beasts prowled;
And, torn and bleeding, he would trudge and sigh
Over wet slopes where thunder shook and howled
Or on parched trails beneath a desert sky;
And now and then some curious passer-by
Would voice suspicious questions; and at times
He pled not guilty to atrocious crimes;

But always, though his limbs grew sore and lean
With perilous questing on the lonely road,
He yearned to dart into the far unseen,
And scarcely knew his shoulders bore a load;
While, urged as by some red-hot inner goad,
He dreamt of mountains, clouded still from view,
Where haunted pools imaged the heaven's blue;

And that fair vision made his wanderings sweet
And turned the wayside dust to rich perfume;
And, where the fields spread brown beneath his feet,
He saw the violet and magnolia bloom;
And, even in stormy midnight's starless gloom,
He glimpsed impassioned beauty, since he sought
The loftiest bourn of human strife or thought.

How far the ranges of his dream might be,
He could not answer. Though his pathway led
Over slow-rising meadows endlessly,
He saw no sunset-pillowing peaks ahead.
Day after day interminably to tread
Across blown barrens!—month on month to strain
Wearying eyes beyond an edgeless plain!

Many a time, beside some friendly fire
Or roving down a rock-scarred windy way
With chance-met vagabonds, he would inquire
Where the white mountains of his vision lay.
But men would only gape, and some would say,
"How answer where those frozen summits are?—
Weird as the moon they shine, and not less far!"

Weird as the moon they seemed! How few, how few
Spoke of the pool upon the sparkling height!
Only one man, one seasoned wanderer, knew
The tale of how it glimmered crystal-bright.
But even he had never seen its light;
And where it was he could not say, nor guess
In what remote and glacial wilderness.

Oh, small the comfort that Lodalga earned
From all his listeners! He must still abide
Alone, alone!—how much alone he learned
Only when scores had heard him, to confide
He took blind paths that reached no mountainside.
Alone!—and in that whole well-peopled land
There was no tongue to aid, no heart to understand!

THE LONE ADVENTURER

As solitary as the crag-bound pool
Couched on the bare and uncompanioned peak!—
Sometimes, at twilight, when the breeze blew cool
Over gray buttes or grass-lands flat and bleak;
Or when the sunset, reddening, seemed to seek
Some burning desolation all its own
In the sky's desert, where forlorn it shone,—

Then the worn rover, lifting tired eyes
Into a world oblivious to his pain,
Would feel his own stark isolation rise
Like a new pang, to ask if all were vain,
And what the meaning of the toil and strain
Along dark highways, dodging fanged despair,
With neither earth nor sky nor man to care.

And by the brink of thunder-throated streams
Or from the watch-tower of some starry hill
Or when the moonlight cast seducive beams
Over some forest lake, and all was still
As though some weird enchanter worked his will,
Then too the youth would silently bemoan
That the long journey must be made alone.

The sympathetic touch of hands, the light
That gleams like home-fires from a kindly glance,
The murmured words that spell a world's romance
And leave one fearless of the storm and night,—
For these Lodalga yearned—a boon so slight
And yet so far to seek!—and day by day
This sad desire would make him more its prey.

And most of all, when loitering through some town
Where ox-teams rattled in the bannered street,
And chattering throngs, with festal leaves and crown,
Filled every doorway, and his gaze would greet
Many a maiden's face that seemed as sweet
As truth itself, the prince grew dismal-eyed
That no loved comrade wandered at his side.

"With one to share my fortunes," he would say,
"I might far easier gain the snow-fringed west."
And then again, "Alas, there is no way
Save of the friendless trail and lonely quest."
And on and on, and ever on he pressed;
And on and on, still slave beneath the prod
Of that bright vision ruling like a god.

And did he never once repine, nor grieve
For the vast empire he had thrust aside,
Nor, in slow midnights, hunger to retrieve
His princely purple, and to doff his pride,
And hasten back to court, and take as bride
Her whom King Helmud favored, and prepare
For those rich robes a sovereign must wear?

If doubt tormented him and fear assailed
(And, being human, how escape their sting?)
His purpose, blown and storm-tost, never failed,
Nor did his eyes, though weary, ever cling
To those horizons that were vanishing;
But onward, and still onward he would gaze
To where new sky-lines met the earth in haze.

But not until the slow-advancing weeks
Had lengthened to a year, did he attain
Faint intimation that the fabled peaks
Were not illusion, nor his purpose vain.
Then, dimly banked above the distant plain,
He saw a low thin line of mountains rise,
Mistily blue beneath the evening skies.

THE ESCAPE

At first he was not sure, for in the gray
Of phantom twilight, those far ranges seemed
Less like the solid, stony hills of day
Than like some fairy mountains he had dreamed.
But when the clear, prosaic morning beamed
Over the wide plateau, he still could see
Pale heights that shouldered toward infinity,—

Pale heights that bade him match the courier's pace
And flash across the far-drawn fields between,
Do battle with the mountains face to face,
And in some craggy forest or ravine
Or where bald glaciers cast a deathly spell,
Grasp at immortal secrets long unseen
And fathom truths no living lips could tell.

Over the plain, whose unfrequented road
Had dwindled to a stubbly, winding track
Where wild herds browsed, the lone adventurer strode,
Worn by his seeking, wearied by his pack,
But never pausing ere the night stared black
Into his yearning face, and he might lie
In dream-tost sleep till dawn made red the sky.

And, while the daylight held, Lodalga's gaze
Would ever travel, searching, to the west,
Where, capped by cloud or muffled in a haze,
With chiselled beak or arrow-headed crest,
The longed-for mountains spread ten score abreast,
Hour on hour with domes more boldly lifted,
Gorges more deep, and vales more clearly rifted.

And now, though still far-off, their summits shone
With spots and patches of a frosty white.
Many a lordly peak stood forth alone,
Bare flanks sharp-curving to the azure height
Or gray spires ghostly in the sunset light.
And furrowed ranges, in a saw-toothed band,
Seemed the mad carvings of some giant hand.

Then a strange exaltation filled the prince,
As of a wanderer from an alien shore
Who sees home places, lost to mind long since
Yet opening door upon neglected door
Into the outcast wealth of years before;
And as the peaks loomed nearer, they became
Like old companions he might now reclaim.

And all the loneliness of empty trails
And all the heartsore and the weary ache,
Became as sorrows in forgotten tales
Or dragon dreams remembered when awake.
And so, with joy and singing, he would take
His path into the twilight, while his eyes
Imaged the vision in the sunset skies.

Oh, to attain those beckoning crests of snow!
Oh, to stand proudly on the topmost peak,
Stare in the world-reflecting pool, and know
One saw the light which all, unknowing, seek,
And reached the bourn whereto all men must go!
Soon, soon—so blazed the wanderer's sudden hope—
He might toil, conquering, up the final slope!

PART III

THE SHEPHERDESS OF THE PLAINS

But blind, sardonic gulfs still barred the way
To the bright waters of the mountaintop.
And though he never let his footsteps stray
From westward seeking, nor his spirits drop,
Yet some weird force commanded him to stop,—
Some ambushed force that, cat-like, lies in wait
For beast and man—and that we know as Fate.

When but a day of travel—so he thought—
Parted him from the billowy foothill range,
Fortune abandoned him, and he was caught
In a new adventure perilous and strange.
Then all his body felt a deathly change:
He faltered, stumbled, like a man grown old;
His limbs were scorching, then were shivering cold;

His heart thumped fiercely, and his forehead ached
And flushed a burning crimson, while his breast
Pained dully, and his thirst could not be slaked.
Feebly he tottered, still into the west,
But time on time he had to pause and rest,
And always found it harder than before
To rise and take the endless trail once more.

A shepherd maiden, when the night drew near
And flocks were driven homeward, gaped amazed
To see a tall and staggering form appear
Round the road's bend, as though age-worn and dazed;
And as, in mute bewilderment, she gazed,
The frail shape trembled in some palsying spell,
Then earthward in a slumping heap it fell.

With a shocked cry, she fled on lightning feet
Straight to the stricken rover, and began
To warm those pallid features, and entreat
The unwilling life-blood of the lifeless man
Back to the limbs where icy slow it ran.
And while deft fingers like swift shuttles plied,
She saw how youthful-fair he was, and sighed.

And he, when through the darkness where he lay
The light in pale confusion broke anew,
Marvelled to see two eyes of deep-set blue
Staring in wonder mixed with vague dismay—
And marvelled more to hear the maiden say,
"Stranger, be not distressed, nor take alarm;
We'll care for you, and shield you from all harm."

Dimly it came to him that he had died
And in some lovelier realm had been re-born,
Where wingèd angels hovered at his side
And lonely wanderers were not left forlorn
To push with bleeding hands through rock and thorn.
And she with tearful pity in her eyes,
Seemed like some watcher out of Paradise.

No more than this he knew. . . . The wasting fire
Again devoured him, and his brain grew numb.
He did not see the moist-cheeked maid retire
And call two kinsmen, who made haste to come,
And, finding him in wild delirium,
Lifted him gently, carried him straightway
To their rude dwelling-place of thatch and clay.

II

There for slow weeks he lingered, fever-racked,
With features shrunken, and with burning head,
Speechless with agony. And yet he lacked
No needed care. All day, beside his bed
The maiden sat, with woollen woof and thread,
Yet ready, at a gesture, to attend
With herbs and drink, and be both nurse and friend.

And sometimes, when he slumbered, and his face,
Averted, seemed to stare at things remote,
Her eyes, soft smiling at the lad, would trace
The chiselled outlines of his mouth and throat;
And, with a glance half-wistful, she would note
The wide, bold sweep of forehead, and the hair
Flaxen and light as fabled mermaids wear.

And after days and endless weary days
And nights of tortured dream, there came an hour
When the pale youth could smile on her, and praise
Her grace of manner and her healing power.
Then benedictions in a grateful shower
Poured from his lips; and her slim head withdrew
To hide the blush at hidden truths it knew.

And now, still knitting, she would gaze at him,
And he gaze, musing, at those pensive eyes.
And sometimes, briefly, his own eyes grew dim
As when one peers at new-discovered skies
Or views strange worlds in wonder and surprise;
And glittering vistas, undiscerned before,
Gleamed like the opening of a magic door;

And he would dart to rare and fiery heights
While earth went whirling pebble-like below,
And skirting sun and moon in trance-held flights,
Would feel himself above the flux and flow
Of mortal moments, feel the pure white glow
Of things eternal—whose star-covered face
Seemed but the mirror of a maiden's grace.

Oh, what new withering ecstasy was this
That, hotter than the fever, drugged his veins
With daylong dreams of some vague, burning bliss,
And lightning visions, and soul-rending pains,
Till longing held unconquerably the reins
Of all his being, and he knew no god
Save for a reverenced girlish smile or nod?

Where now the hunger for the upland trail,
The long, lone climb, the pool upon the peak?
What did his months of suffering toil avail
When in a shepherd's hut he lay, too weak
To face the unleashed wind, to dare or seek?
Why not renounce old quests that came to naught
And take new treasures which he found unsought?

So he debated when, by slow degrees,
His strength, returning, had restored the world.
By life, the Janus-headed, he was hurled
Between the jaws of two adverse decrees:
Yonder the timeless, beckoning mysteries
Of white-browed mountains; here two sparkling eyes
Deep and inscrutable as midnight skies.

III

Yet he must rise again—again must take
The friendless highroad of his destiny,
And climb steep ridges, though his heart should break,
To the shorn summits, bare of herb and tree,
Nor let the too-seducive witchery
Of hands and tresses lure him to a net
Soft-spun for failure and for long regret.

Alas! a plan far harder than he knew!
When, slowly convalescing, he would sit
And watch her skilled hands fetch his bread, or brew
Some homely lotion, or sedately knit,
He found, surprised, that he had not the wit
To thwart her smiles, or wield a battle lance
Against the conquering legions of her glance.

And they would talk for hours—and she would
tell
Of how, a shepherd's daughter, she had known
Only the wide plain, forced for life to dwell
On treeless ranges where a bleak sun shone;
And how, when rambling through the fields alone
In search of lost sheep, she would often wonder
What lay beyond the blue horizon yonder;

And he, responsive, would describe far lands
Where kings made merry in a crystal hall,
And sometimes let his fingers take her hands
When, with half-wistful eyes, he would recall
The rainbow pageant and the painted ball.
But of all these he spoke with harsh disdain,
Praising instead the open peak and plain.

And when at last, with slow and tottering gait,
He walked once more beneath the roofless sky,
And she, like the bland image of his fate,
Stood at his elbow, ready to supply
All that he beckoned with a word or sigh,—
Then too he could not but confide to her
How good the ways of maids and shepherds were.

Under the night-skies, when the stars burned clear
Across the leagues of blown and shadowy grass,
He murmured low, soft words into her ear
That many a lad has murmured to a lass
In the sweet, haunted hours that gleam, and pass.
And she, eyes glistening to the dark above,
Spoke the glad message of her youth and love.

And all the whispered vows and happy tears,
The swift embraces and contented sighs,
The joy and rapture of ten thousand years
Of men and maidens, came as by surprise
To fill their hearts, and make their spirits wise
In that great law which rules like song, and brings
More power to stars and moonlight than to kings.

Back to the cottage, slowly, arm in arm,
Speechless as ghosts down the still night they strayed,
Like spellbound wanderers warded from all harm
By a Merlin's mantle or a genie's blade.
Yet even then some treacherous thought betrayed
Lodalga's gladness—wilful fancy showed
Dim pools far-gleaming on a mountain road.

And he was led, with trembling lips, to speak
Of fabled ranges beckoning snowy white,
And those charmed mysteries, guarded by the peak,
Which lured him ever, like a lamp at night,
Into the darkness, up the rocky height.
And then, with passion in his quavering tone,
He pleaded, "Let me not go forth alone;

"But come, belovèd, come and climb with me
Into the sunset mountains, where the snows
Veil the dark secrets of our destiny,
And wait, in ageless silence, to disclose
Wonders that all men seek but no man knows.
Oh, come, belovèd—let our youth take wing
Beyond the dust of every earthly thing.

"Let us go soaring, crest on splintered crest,
Over the snow-peaks of the ultimate land,
Where, in blue vistas glimmering to the west,
Infinity shines bright, and we may stand
On the world's houseless summit, hand in hand,
And, with rapt vision, see beyond the line
Of the gray horizon, into the divine.

"Belovèd, come," he urged. "Come far away
Into those mapless highlands, airy clear,
Where all the trials and tragedies that slay,
The wounds that shatter, fade and disappear."
But she, with breast soft-heaving, seemed to hear
Scarcely a word he murmured; and a sigh
Came as her earliest, undesigned reply.

"You speak of wanderings I shall never know,
And heights I cannot reach," she made lament.
"For I am daughter of the plains, and so
Should only perish in the bold ascent.
Gladly I'd follow, follow where you went,
And yet my weight would be a weary drag
To bind your limbs, and make your spirits lag."

And silence closed around them once again.
And the chill stars shone down in bitter mirth.
Some night-beast grumbled from a lonely fen,
And night-winds howled, and shadows filled the
earth.
Then on his lips tempestuous words had birth,
And, with the terror of some nameless ill,
He begged her not to leave him desolate still.

"When I was dying, you were kind," he cried,
"And nursed me back to tremulous life once more.
Yet if my very spirit failed and died,
Would you but hear me call—and close the door?
Oh, if I walked without you, how ignore
These sad, sweet hours? Always I should see
Your shadow like a phantom mocking me.

"And every wind should breathe aloud your name,
And every rivulet murmur songs of you.
And you would haunt the sunset's tragic flame,
And the cold fogs of night, and morning blue.
Oh, where I wander, you must wander too!
Leave your safe walls, your lowlands! Come, and
take
The mountain trail for love's eternal sake!"

Tears were her answer—stormy tears fast turning
To speech as wild and troubled as his own.
"Remain, my lover! Let no rainbow yearning
Lure you, moth-fluttering, to embark alone
From the dear ranges of the tried and known
Into the dark and perilous. Stay with me,
Stay, and you'll learn how happy we shall be!

"Oh, you shall find the light of common things
Fairer than that which gilds the glacier's dome!
Stay!—walk the fields, and taste the joy that springs
From meadow flowers, and the doors of home!
Over the wide sheep-pastures let us roam,
But not up cliffs or crags! True lovers crave
Some firmer housing than the wind or wave!"

And, as she spoke, bright longing filled her face;
And her dim tresses, in a fluttering trail,
Wavered like shadows in the wakening gale;
And her thin form, dark-outlined, had the grace
Of some pure spirit, free from time and place.
And a great storm was in Lodalga's heart;
Strange lightnings pierced with many a shivering dart;

And he felt borne down some torrential stream
While on the bank, with gesturing hands outspread
She watched him sinking, sinking; and the gleam
Of her moist eyes might lure him from the dead
Back to the world, if but he would be led;
And while she beckoned, he would hear no more
The whirling, strangling waters hiss and roar.

Then he was lured to draw her back again
Into his arms, and never let her go,
And there forget the world of winds and men,
The empty highway, and the peaks of snow,
And with her love abide content below
In the green valley, and no longer clutch
At starbeams that receded at a touch.

Suddenly, with a moaning, stifled cry,
He seized her hands; and their long-drawn embrace
Seemed to blot out the fields, the stars, the sky,
And leave two bodiless spirits in their place.
But some unspoken torment racked his face
When he released her; and his eyes took flame
With new-inspired but agonizing aim.

And, standing close beside her in the dark
With tight-pressed fingers but averted gaze,
He murmured words that quenched the sanguine spark
In her own eyes, and blurred her world with haze.
"Belovèd, I must take far-winding ways
Above the clouds—and if your native plain
Must hold you always, I cannot remain.

"Farewell, belovèd! I am called to go
Down the long road where blue horizons shine.
But be not sad! I shall return, I know,
When I have pierced the mountain's hidden shrine,
And peered into the timeless and divine.
I shall return! So do not sigh, nor grieve.
When next I come to you, I shall not leave!"

"You leave forever!" With beseeching eyes
Yet with proud anger shuddering in her voice
She hurled her challenge. "Love neglected, dies!
And when you choose, you make eternal choice!
So choose, my lover! Let us both rejoice
If you are blest!—but do not go away
And think new seasons will restore to-day!

"The very stars shall alter in their track,
These blossomy fields shall not allure as now,
But clouds shall gather, ere you wander back,
And we shall meet as strangers, marvelling how
We once were moved to passionate kiss and vow.
Oh, do not leave me! How shall love stay green
When years, like ghostly hand-marks, stare be-
tween?"

Then her soft fingers clutched his mantle's hem,
And her imploring face shone with a light
Of fierce enchantment, past his power to stem,
That made him all but captive to its might.
And in the sorcery of the spellbound night
And the deeper sorcery of the maiden's glance
He seemed to own no mistress but romance:

Till once again gray Reason gave him words:
"Since the heights call me, let them call me soon!
Here, on the plain, amid the drowsy herds,
Where the rank grass confronts a wastrel moon,
I should but find my spirit out of tune
With the whole world, and daily should lament
That life denied one dearly sought event.

"And you, boon comrade in my grief, would learn
That I was mated to the Might-Have-Been;
And, all the desolate years, my thoughts would
turn
Sadly to those high peaks I hoped to win.
So let us not commit the crowning sin
Against the days to be. Farewell! Farewell!
Long I shall dream of you, wherever I may dwell!"

Then, for the last time, she was folded round
In quivering arms that she would feel no more;
Till, like a shadow, almost without sound,
He slipped away, and left her at her door,
While grayly, on the prairie's eastern shore,
The sad dawn broke; and one long, muffled cry
Sobbed to the lonely fields, and moaned without
reply.

PART IV

THE POOL UPON THE PEAK

I

Among the ice-crowned mountains to the west
Of Helmud's empire, where the peaks of snow
Surmount the cloud-peaks, battered crest on crest,
And crooked canyons ramble miles below,
Sometimes a sleety wind would snarl and blow
Round a slim figure that pursued alone
The snake-meanderings of a trail of stone.

Stray huntsmen saw him on some shadowy height,
A black form etched against the sunset red,
And shepherds in the valley would invite
The wild-eyed wanderer to a crust or bed.
And where the fire-girt gypsy tents were spread
By swirling torrents, men would watch him roam
Like a lost phantom lacking hope and home.

And forlorn forests knew him, where the boughs
Made a dim twilight roof; and he would toil
Up rock-strewn summits, with a cave for house,
When spitting geysers would erupt and boil
Amid scrub pines that sucked a beggared soil;
And in green bouldery gorges he would wander
Where twisted streams poured with the roar of thunder.

THE LONE ADVENTURER

Lonely, forever lonely!—none could say
That he had ever held a comrade's hand;
And some who, unobserved, had seen him stray
Up the gnarled slopes, and through the wind-blown sand
And thorny brush of an unfriendly land,
Rumored his eyes had some unearthly gleam,
As though his sole companion were a dream.

And strange the tales that nomads told of him
Beside the camp-fire or the tavern gate;
Of how, though long of beard and bronzed of limb,
He spoke as one bred to a lord's estate
And had the manners of the proud and great;
And how, when slumbering, once they heard him moan
And mutter furious words about a throne.

And it was said that madness blurred his mind,
For he went wandering, like a man hard pressed,
Past endless ridges, savage-willed to find
A fairy pool upon some mountain's breast;
And, pausing not for pleasure nor for rest
He journeyed on and on, till scoffers thought
A snowy grave must be the goal he sought.

"A hundred peaks," one grizzled rover swore,
"Have seen him scale stone ledges, yard on yard,
To the chill summits; and a hundred more
May yet behold his footsteps drag and plod.
But does it matter that the path be hard?
For somewhere, far-off—so the wise men think—
A magic pool shines on the mountain's brink."

But others, listening to the tale, would smile
And say the pool shone in the vacant air.
And, laughing at the madman, they would while
The hours away; and many a tongue would share
The jests and raillery at a joke so rare. . . .
And thus five years went by. . . . And all that time
The wanderer had not ceased to search and climb.

II

When the fifth summer had recalled the snows
From the high valleys, and made green the grass,
The lonely seeker was observed to pass
Where Kungla's dominating peak arose
Like a white god—how tall no mortal knows.
And there, amid the wildest, loftiest range,
Lodalga prayed his barren fate would change.

For life had struck with tigerish fang and claw
And slashed the sinews of his every hope,
And he was not the youth who, years before,
Had dreamt of triumph, and rejoiced to cope
With black ravine and boulder-littered slope.
But the sad traceries of his brooding face
Showed proof of sufferings time could not erase.

And one that knew him in a happier year
Might now have passed him by without a nod.
The wolfskin mantle of the mountaineer,
The rude spiked boots, the pack and oaken rod,
Scarcely befitted one revered as god
By a whole kingdom; while his uncropped hair
Hung scraggly as the forelocks of a bear.

And yet, when peering deep into those eyes
That burned with sad, impenetrable fire,
One might behold fresh beauty, and surmise
The strength that springs of unfulfilled desire
When the bold soul takes courage to aspire
Above the walls that bound it. So the youth,
Unknowing, bore the first impress of truth.

But something of the madness of despair
Trembled across the sun-tanned wistful face
When, creeping down a tortuous craggy stair,
He stood at towering Kungla's wooded base.
He thought how many another mountain place
Had seen him toil as now; how many a time
Hope gave his footsteps power for the climb;

How always, when his eyes surveyed the peak,
Delusive faith would plead that here at last
Shone the bright pool he came so far to seek;
But how, when every ridge and crest was past
And the ranges rolled beneath him, ocean-vast,
He would but view bare mountains, wall on wall,
And never see the longed-for pool at all.

And now, so often were his dreams deceived,
He dared not hope, but took the ascending track
Not as in earlier years, when he believed
In certain conquest, though the clouds loomed
black,
But as a man who brooks no turning back
When once his heart is given, though he die
With parched limbs sprawled beneath a desert sky.

THE LONE ADVENTURER

Again to take the twining, rock-bound trail!—
Again to crawl on bleeding hands and knees
Up wet escarpments, where an unchecked gale
Lunges and cuts with screeching mockeries;
While, like a taunting god above, one sees
The sky-hung cone, whose haughty blue or gray
Seems, on a slow approach, to slowly draw away.

Three times the sun had set, and glittering night
Had lit her starry lanterns in the dark,
Before the wanderer looked with unblurred sight
Upon the turrets of his snow-capped mark.
Then jutting high above him, straight and white,
He saw the tapering bare-faced summit rise
To the azure dimness of the vacant skies.

Sadly he struggled on, for he had seen
No magic pool, though many a loud cascade
Rang from the walls of forest-robed ravine
And many a foaming rivulet plunged and played.
Nor did he hold that when the climb was made
His searching vision would at last explore
Aught but the barren snow-banks, as before.

And yet another night he pitched his camp
On a chill flat above the timber line,
And there, with only moonlight for a lamp,
He heard the homeless storm-wind sob and whine.
And when the weary dawn began to shine
He took his pack once more, resolved to tread
The peak itself ere sunset smoldered red.

And up the precipice's beetling face
He crept with hands that fly-like clutched the rock,
When one misstep might hurtle him through space
To a still land where mountains could not mock.
And up torn slopes that glaciers tried to block
And over cloud-dimmed passes, still he pressed
With eyes firm-fastened on the beckoning crest:

Till, when the dreary day was nearly done,
He scaled the cliff-walls to a weird plateau,
Whose narrow floor, beneath the yellowing sun,
Glittered with ice that shed a steely glow.
And on its further reaches, just below
The glowering peak, Lodalga gaped to view
A tiny lake that glimmered faintly blue.

A haunted blue!—a blue like that of eyes
Grave with the soul's unfathomable light!—
Then slowly, shadowed by the darkening skies,
It paled to gray, then kindled lantern-bright
With the reflected altar-fires of night.
And in its tranquil depths one might behold
The peak, the burning heavens, and clouds of gold.

And as Lodalga watched, the sunset waned
With far-strewn ashes glaring fiery red.
Soon, on the waveless waters, there remained
Only a crimson afterglow, that shed
Ghost-glimmers from the luminance overhead,
Then fluttered out, till not one truant spark
Pierced the fast-deepening mantle of the dark.

And now the stars came forth—and on the lake
The youth beheld their mirrored radiance shine.
He saw the light of lonely Venus break
Along the surface in a glistening line,
As though it cut a path to lands divine,
And summoned from the worn world's stormy shore
To where still waters sparkle evermore.

THE POOL UPON THE PEAK

In silence stranger than tumultuous sound
The charmed plateau and shadowy mountains lay.
Slowly, as over consecrated ground,
The cautious breezes moved; and far away,
Where the slim peak was stationed, spectral gray,
Some noiseless meteor now and then would gleam
Like the last embers of a dying dream.

And all the long and frosty hours of night,
While the far-circling stars went faintly past,
He searched the dim lake-ripples for some light
Only one lake in all the world could cast.
Here, surely, was the magic pool at last!
But why no flashing of the silvery wings,
Bright with the radiance of immortal things?

Only the constellations, darkly turning!—
Only the dusky peak and phantom sky!
Oh, where the solace for the unquenched yearning
That lured his tired and flagging steps on high?
Was there but this to view before he die?—
Cold ranges, and the night-time, and the stars
Seen in lone pools no human shadow mars?

And while he pondered, and the half-moon rose
From the jagged sky-line, draped in yellow haze,
And cast an eerie light across the snows
And lit the waters with pale golden rays,
There seemed to flash, before his startled gaze,
The outlines of some vague and towering form,
Dim-viewed as cloud-archangels in a storm.

Perhaps it was not with his eyes he saw
But with some deeper vision of the mind.
For he beheld the shape slowly withdraw
While beckoning to the pool; then gaped to find
The specter fading into mist and wind.
And weirdly, as he watched it, came the thought
He might now gaze upon the goal he sought.

And while new hope came fluttering through his heart
And beat with pulse of music in his veins,
He saw the eastern hazes pale and part
And deck the summits with fog-silvered trains.
And soon the night's dim-smoldering remains
Had reddened all the heavens; and the gray
Of brightening ranges prophesied the day.

And in the pool the crimson sunrise shone
Like the sad wraith of some unearthly fire,
With cloudy tapestries and frescoes thrown
Over the mountain roof from spire to spire,
So that Lodalga felt his soul aspire,
In a wild transport, to that kindling height
Brocaded with the day's awakening light.

And all his being leapt to fiery rapture,
And he felt delivered from his earthly frame
In a mastering ecstasy that seemed to capture
Immortal secrets from the sunrise flame.
And from locked chambers of his mind, there
came
Faint notes of song and airy whisperings
That told of unseen lights and flashing wings;

And with the voice of one who first descries
The shoals and cliffs of some untrodden shore,
He gave a low, short murmur of surprise,
Trembling in fierce delight unfelt before.
Strangely, as when some adamantine door
Swings open, and enchanted vistas smile
With many a cloudy strait and sparkling isle,—

So strangely, and so swiftly, he was drawn
Out of the mist-land where he groped in vain
Into some clearer region where the dawn
Makes hill and stream and meadow picture-plain.
No more he need go fumbling to attain
The pool-held secret!—at his feet it shone
Brightly as truth that he had always known;

And in the golden funeral-pyre of day
Mirrored in lonely waters mountain-deep;
And in the stars, whose glittering display
Circled the desert sky with deathless sweep;
And in the dawn, that through drab clouds would
peep
Like some life-granting eye, Lodalga read
The mysteries of the living and the dead,

The mysteries of the heavens and the earth,
And all that was, and all things yet to be,
And those strange shadows gathering round our
birth,
That lead, through rainy grief or rainbowed
mirth,
To the last gateway of our destiny.
And, seeing what his lips could never tell,
Long did Lodalga feel the magic spell.

THE POOL UPON THE PEAK

The cycle of the planets, drifting, drifting
Across the wastes of the eternal sky,
The light of suns submerged but newly lifting,
And light of stars that change but cannot die—
In these the secret of all things must lie,
And these are mirrored, as in fog-blurred glass,
In the cloud-glimmerings of the lives we pass.

All the fixed movement, and the slow progression
From light to dark, and dark to light again,
Like hopes and loves and fears in long succession
Or like the candle birth and death of men;
All the weird heavens, closed to human ken,
And that grave flux and flow which seems to draw
Sun-swarm and satellite in age-old law—

These must be seen and known before one knows
The meaning hidden at the heart of time;
But these are only shown to him who goes
Bleeding and footsore up those stairs that climb
To the forsaken peaks; and all the grime,
The din and dust of man's affairs must fade
Before the immortal truths may be betrayed.

So mused Lodalga, as he stared in awe
At the pale waters flickering elfin blue,
Making him oddly part of all he saw,
Merging his being in the mirrored view
Of peak and sky, until he scarcely knew
If the great world lay spread beyond, or he
Contained the ages and infinity.

And visions filled him, fitful as the light
And interlacing shadows when the gale
Ruffles thin leafage; and he reached a height
That made tall mountains level with the vale,
And made his wanderings seem a pygmy's tale,
And touched his mind with some eternal lore
Which tongue may not reveal nor eye explore.

And yet he felt the joy not all his own
That truth went quivering through his heart like
song.
Faintly he heard some plaintive overtone
Bringing remembrance of the wall-bound throng
And all the lightning thrusts of pain and wrong
In the world's darkness. And he yearned to show
His unshared vision to the hordes below.

He yearned to glide away on wingèd feet
Back to the towns where thousands swarmed and
died,
And lead the sufferers from the fuming street
To the stark silence of the mountainside
And the charmed pool, and there with them abide
Forever!—so delivering all mankind
From the dark roads they followed, maimed and
blind,

And so re-lighting, in gray-windowed souls,
The heaven-scanning torch of sun and star,
And with their rays illumining cloud-hid goals
And beckoning through the fog to peaks afar.
"O men, that on some unseen granite bar
Beat out your lives in vain, come, follow me,
Follow!" Lodalga cried in ecstasy,

"And you shall catch, as I, the immortal gleam,
Where still lakes, brooding, mirror lonely skies,
And to your hearts shall come a light and gleam
That shows a glimpse of hidden Paradise
And tells what barren fury underlies
The life of court and street. Oh, come, and learn
The truth for which the very ages burn!

"Oh, come, and in your sad and wandering lives
Let some unfading signal-lantern shine.
Then, though the ache and heartsore still survives,
You may not languish, since you have a sign
Hinting of things undying and divine.
O unseen friends, down to the vale I go
That you may climb, and learn the truths I know!"

Then, with a final, lingering, awe-struck glance
At the blue pool and scarcely bluer skies,
He started slowly, still as in a trance,
Down a long rocky chimney; and his eyes
Traveled, in smiling, vision-held surmise,
Far, far away, beyond the last dim peak,
Where spread the misty plain that he once more must seek.

PART V

THE RETURN

I

Five years went by—five slow and weary years
Fraught with the bitter-sweet of joy and pain
For swarms that trod, in ecstasy or tears,
The level highways of the town and plain.
And babes were born, and agèd lords were slain,
And youths were love-sick, and a million men
Struggled and dreamed, and sank to rise again.

But there was one who in the cares and hopes
Of hut and mansion, played an alien's part.
Sad as a dungeoned king that gropes and gropes
Round dusky doors and gratings, he would start
Like a lone wraith through forum, field and mart,
Searching for slave or prince to lend an ear
To frenzied words that few desired to hear.

Men called him mad—and surely there was madness
In those worn cheeks that piteous furrows marred,
Those eyes that shone with an eternal sadness,
And sun-burnt brow all seamed and weather-scarred
As of a wanderer old and evil-starred;
And that dense beard, in straggling disarray,
Whose unshorn edges showed a touch of gray.

THE LONE ADVENTURER

Men called him mad—and always mocking laughter
Rang in his footsteps—and in farm or town
Stray urchins, gibbering, would follow after,
And with sharp stones and mire would hunt him down.
And when he spoke, good citizens would frown
And shout accusing oaths—and some demanded
That for his crimes he be impaled or branded.

And it was said that many a pack of dogs
Had trailed him, braying, over hill and field,
Till, in forsaken caves or river bogs,
He slipped from view, and long remained concealed;
And there was wicked magic he could wield
(So men reported)—else how save his life
From brigand's arrows and the headman's knife?

Endlessly wandering on valley roads,
A tattered figure, mud-stained and forlorn,
He had no fear of swords nor clawing goads
Nor iron-fingered hands nor tongues of scorn;
Far over marsh and desert he was borne
As by some inner power that lent him wings
Above the blood and slime of earthly things.

And though a thousand arms were raised to smite
And a thousand eyes would flash derisive fire,
His gaze was fastened still upon that light
Which was the beacon of his life's desire,
But which the swarms who gave their days for hire
Could never see, or, seeing, could not know—
Blind ants oblivious of the starlight's glow.

For the sad years had taught him, more and more,
That what he viewed he needs must view alone;
And he no longer fancied, as of yore,
That all had hopes and transports like his own,
That all craved glimpses into worlds unknown,
Or saw this world with vision fixed beyond
The walls that held them in a stifling bond.

Often he thought of how, when first he hastened
From that far pool where timeless secrets lay,
He pleaded, with calm spirit still unchastened,
That men should take the eternal mountain way,
But found, in disenchantment and dismay,
His hearers would but blankly glare and gape,
Till taunting smiles and titters would escape;

And he remembered how he made appeal
To myriad folk of town and countryside,
How some had mockery they could not conceal,
And others cursed, or muttered that he lied,
While two or three, who listened wistful-eyed,
Followed him but in words, and did not show
The zeal and fire to seek the crags of snow.

And of the thousands that had heard him speak
And caught some spark from his impassioned eyes,
Not one had ever looked upon the peak,
Or answered save with promises and sighs.
Not one!—and he was waxing sadly wise,
Grieved not so much that his own lamp burnt low
As that it kindled no responsive glow.

Still, where untrodden peaks lay cold and bare,
Shone the dread fires of eternity.
And, knowing that so few would seek or dare
And that with shuttered eyes they tried to see,
He felt as lonely as a soul could be—
Lonely to gaze in uncompanioned awe
On mysteries that no fellow mortal saw.

Yet, when he faced the bigot's snarls and blows
Or breasted perilous stones the craven threw,
Or writhed beneath the self-combating throes
That sometimes on forsaken trails he knew,
Asking why, child-like, he must still pursue
Fading mirages—then his weakening aim
Drew power from a far but deathless flame.

And still he saw the mirrored light of stars
And golden watch-fires of the rising day
Beyond the ultimate mountain's rocky bars,
Where sky-revealing waveless waters lay.
And in blind snow-storms, in the rains of May
And autumn mist, the vision would return
And lend him will to strive and strength to yearn.

But as the years groaned by, and still he fought
The grimacing world's derision and disdain,
It seemed the illumining glimmers he had caught
Grew more remote; and he could scarce re-gain
The light and splendor here upon the plain
And in the screeching town. He was as one
Grown blind, who muses on the vanished sun;

Or as a man within whose deafened ear
Reverberates an old melodious song
That once bore solace for all mortal wrong
And stopped the stars themselves in mid-career,
But that, close-muffled many a dreary year,
Stirs but pale echoes of those harmonies
That once enthralled the very hills and seas.

And there were stormy moments when he lost
Remembrance of the pool-enamored height;
When, like a sailless frigate billow-tost,
He could not heed the distant beacon light.
And sometimes, brooding in the desolate night,
With fists tight-clenched in torment, he would cry
His doubts and anguish to the stoic sky.

In place of life so vain and fever-racked
He might have chosen laurel wreath and crown,
And won the love and reverence that he lacked
And seen whole empires cringe beneath his
frown.—
And was it better to be branded clown?—
Oh, was it better to be flayed and burned
In giving men the enchanted light they spurned?

Oh, why be martyred in a friendless cause,
Scattering bubbles round the sneering earth?
Why wield a sword in barren-fated wars,
Forfeiting rights that all men earn at birth?
Sooner, far sooner, reel in drunken mirth
Through roaring bar and dance-room, than ignore
Life's golden fruits that, dropping, grow no more!

A happier man and wiser had he been
Never to leave the prairie dust and mire,
To flounder to the neck in purple sin
Or seek the love and labor men require
When lured by no illusive starry fire.
What though he once had glimpsed a heavenly light?—
Meteor-brief it shone—and then there fell the night.

Meteor-brief it shone—and what the gain
To groping millions he had thought to bless?
They still would grope, and would not leave the plain
Because strange lanterns in the wilderness
Glittered with brilliance they could never guess.
Oh, why persuade them to the rash ascent
When in the valley fog they walked content?

So, in bleak hours, the wanderer made complaint,
When men were cruel and skies loomed gray and
stern.
But, though his zeal shone feeble-eyed and faint,
Always old exaltations would return,
And once again, wild-hearted, he would yearn
To kindle fires that summoned all mankind
To the far peak where Knowledge lay enshrined.

II

How long he might have wandered, none can say.
Into chill-blooded age he might have passed
While still he took an unreturning way
And bared his bosom to the rainy blast—
Had not sly fortune intervened at last,
And urged him, with a domineering force,
To circle back to an abandoned course.

Ten years had crawled away since he had fled,
Too sanguine-tempered, from King Helmud's
court.
And in the wild, adventurous life he led
Only a rare and long-relayed report
Told of the works that still his father wrought—
Of how he cowed the land with iron laws
Or swung the sword in vain, victorious wars.

But time had sadder tidings to disclose.
Once, on a winter's evening, he had found
Brief refuge from the dizzy, flickering snows
Beside a tavern fire, and heard the sound
Of gusty laughter echoing all around;
And while he mutely watched the fitful flame,
He gave a start to hear his father's name.

"Alas, for Helmud!" came a muffled sigh.
"Alas, our realm has fallen on evil days!" . . .
And as Lodalga stared, he heard reply,
"I fear the fates have mad and reckless ways
And vanquish one too nobly proud for praise.
Not in a thousand years the gods will bring
An abler warrior or a wiser king!"

"Not in a thousand years," another said,
"Such power and majesty will stir the land!"
And, hearing in a spasm of grief and dread,
Lodalga rose, and with hot trembling hand
Halted the speaker. "Tell me more!" he cried
In voice that thundered like a king's command.
"Surely, you did not say that Helmud died?"

All eyes were fixed upon Lodalga now,
And tipsy revelers gathered close to hear.
"Helmud still lives; yet couriers tell us how
He pines, and has not left his couch this year,
But groans tormented orders for his bier.
And in the court and royal town they pray
To stay the hand no prayers shall ever stay.

"What fire devours his body no man knows—
A hundred wise men have invoked their art
To no avail; and some believe his woes
Knock at the secret chambers of his heart.
Ten years ago the affliction had its start
When that demented youth, the eldest prince,
Vanished on roads where none have trailed him since.

"You know how furious was our monarch's grief;
How hectic fever burnt into his brain,
Until the pitying years had lent relief,
And men surmised he had forgot his pain.
But there are memories that will not be slain,
And so King Helmud, as the dark draws near,
Harkens one voice he cannot choose but hear.

"And sometimes, in the slow, delirious night,
He mutters Prince Lodalga's name, and sighs.
And sometimes, when the day's disdainful light
Floods the cold marble walls, he turns wan eyes
Upon his slaves, and asks that, ere he dies,
They grant one boon—one boon, and only one:
To let him see once more his best belovèd son."

With a low moan, Lodalga turned away—
With a low moan, as of a wounded hare.
And like a madman, with no word to say
But lips tight-clenched in frenzy and despair
He rushed into the reeling outer air
Where swift snow pelted. . . . Through the gloom behind
The tavern laughter rang upon the jeering wind.

III

Week after week he took a tireless course
Over the plain into the rising sun,
With face new-seamed by sorrow and remorse,
And brow whereon regret had fought and won
A wasting war. And he would speak to none
Except to ask what news the couriers brought,
And if the gods had smiled on Helmud's court.

But always woeful tidings spurred him on.
The king was failing—so dispatches read.
And some predicted that the coming dawn
Would find black wreaths about the royal bed.
Then, brooding on the far-flung leagues ahead,
The prince would sigh, and yearn to dart through space
On a magic carpet at the eagle's pace.

Through hill-lands barred with deepening drifts of snow,
And lone sheep-ranges where the winds went mad,
And bridgeless torrents filled to overflow,
And shadow-peopled valleys, cedar-clad,
He hastened on and on, too wistful-sad
To dread the wolves far-howling in the night
Or care if storm-clouds roared or day shone bright.

And now and then he strayed across some mark
Dimly remembered from ten years before,
When, as a youth, he gloried to embark
Beyond gray sky-lines to an unknown shore,—
Some deep-cut fissure in the prairie's floor,
Some ruined ranch-house, or white-breasted stream,
Or moonlit bluffs recalled as in a dream.

THE RETURN

Back on the trail of perished hopes he pressed,
Back from the far adventure he had craved.—
But why return from the wide-canyoned west
To the drab court where he had dwelt enslaved?
He did not wish the honors he had waived,
The silken robe or coronet—why then
Go dashing headlong into chains again?

If one had questioned him, could he have told?
Deep in unthreaded mazes of his mind
There was a Reason he had not designed,
A Cause his searching eyes could not behold.
Some overweening spirit, nursed of old,
Had caught him in a childhood-woven spell
That all the piled-up years could not dispel.

And still his reverence for his king and sire
Lay like a haunting shadow in his heart.
And old remembrance was a quenchless fire
Whose arrowy, stinging flames would hiss and
dart,
Shedding pale rays on many an ancient part
That Helmud played. And in Lodalga's eyes
Dead moments like beseeching ghosts would rise;

And he recalled the sovereign when he bent,
Moist-eyed, above his queenly consort's bier;
And still he heard his father's low lament
At a loved daughter's lightning-brief career;
And out of happier hours he could hear
Loud bursts of laughter, when the monarch played
With his young sons by fount and colonnade.

And all the faded scenes rebuked him still
With clinging tendrils tightening round his breast,
Most sadly potent when, against his will,
Demons of fancy seized him, and oppressed
With visions of an old man, sore distressed,
Whose drawn and yellowing face was like a plea
To one he sought and nevermore should see.

Even now, disconsolate dirges might be sung
And roses might be withering on his tomb.
And was there time to beat the rush of doom
And soothe the grief and longing which had
wrung
That agèd heart, and hear that well known tongue
Murmur in gladness?—was there time to bare
His own remorse, and calm the king's despair?

And by that flame of unconsoled devotion
Roused from live embers of the smoldering past,
Old feuds were quenched in a thunder-fierce emotion
And rancor died like smoke upon the blast.
And he forgot that clouds had overcast
His father's love, but looked on him anew
Like a young child for whom all skies are blue.

And as, with anxious steps, for endless hours,
He trudged and sweated on the barren road,
He dreamt no longer of the snow-white towers
Of steepled mountains, or that debt he owed
To show the pool where mirrored Knowledge glowed.
Some day he would resume the thankless quest,
But now a sharp-toothed dread would suffer him
no rest.

IV

When fields turned green and almond flowers were
blooming,
The lonely wanderer, worn of limb and mind,
Beheld, far-off, those agate columns looming
That once in furious flight he left behind.
And still the crystal domes were golden-lined!—
And, through the years that sundered and
estranged,
Those carven spires and arches shone unchanged!

Unchanged!—when all besides was marred and
altered!—
When his whole life was drooping to decay!
Slowly, with flooded eyes, and steps that faltered,
He plodded on his grave and fateful way,
Dream-held, while from far Persia and Cathay
Long caravans groaned by, and camel teams
Jolted to town in never-ending streams.

At last he too, amid the boisterous throng,
Drifted, unchallenged, past the city wall.
And, once within, he did not dally long
To seek a well-remembered sea-green hall.
But at the gate he heard a sentry call,
And paused to find a brandished steely blade
Flashing an order meant to be obeyed.

"Back, vagabond!" the irate guardian roared,
Scanning the ragged prince in black disdain.
And evil menace lit his eyes; his sword
Gleamed brightly, while Lodalga pled in vain,
"Good friend, I crossed the dreary western plain
To see King Helmud—" Here he was cut short
By laughter mocking like an edged retort.

"Then you believe the king has naught to do
But chat with beggars?"—And the swinging steel
Drew close, as though to slash him through and through,
And all his words were like a child's appeal.
And, pleading still, he had to turn on heel,
While many a sentinel, with looming pike,
Watched his lean form as though prepared to strike.

From gate to gate he flitted, like a shade
Released from Hades to the living land.
And, not less friendless than a ghost, he strayed
Where none would smile or lift a helping hand,
Where none would pause to hear, or understand
That this bronzed wanderer, garbed in faded brown,
Could have a private message for the crown.

"Madman!" they dubbed him, as a myriad tongues
Had dubbed him during all the long, sad years.
And he might but have screamed with bursting lungs
And gained a dungeon, where no mortal ears
Could heed his groans, no voice assuage his tears;
And four stone walls might have become his grave,
Had not he met a friend in an old forgotten slave.

Skirting the royal courtyard, where the hounds
Tugged at steel chains, with lips that snarled and
curled,
He saw a gray, bent man who made his rounds
Among the kennels, whistling low, and hurled
Bones to the growling pack. And in his eyes
Some gleam, as from a lost, once-precious world,
Prompted the prince to watch in mute surprise.

Where had he seen that shambling form before?—
That tawny, pockmarked face and thinning hair?
Suddenly, through the years that were no more,
He saw himself upon the palace stair,
A red-cheeked lad, while with momentous air
The king's chief gardener, at his pleas, supplied
Breath-taking tales he followed gaping-eyed.

"Norval!" he muttered, as the servant's name
Came back to him through the dark void of years.
And the old man stopped short; and all his frame
Shuddered, and his pale eyes were brimmed with
tears.
"Can this be true? Can I believe my ears?"
He mumbled, while his shocked, inquiring gaze
Fell on the wanderer's rags in blank amaze.

"Lodalga!—is it you returned?" he cried.
"The voice is yours!—the face is scarce your own!"
And ere the thunder-stricken prince replied,
Impulsively two quivering arms were thrown
About his shoulders; and two warm eyes shone
In happy greeting. "Welcome back, my lord!
We need you, need your scepter and your sword!

"We need you, for the empire has no head
And soulless claimants wrangle for the crown!"—
"And is my father living, then—or dead?"
Lodalga gasped.—But with bleak eyes bent down
And brow contracted in a desolate frown,
Norval announced, "The king still lives, they say,
But sinks and sinks, while futile thousands pray.

"And if you would behold him ere he lies
Speechless and stiff on the cold casket stone,
You must make haste—for he may close his eyes
Before another sun has set and shone."
"Then help me!" begged Lodalga, with a moan.
"Find me some royal vestments, to evince
That I am not a scullion, but a prince!"

"I'll try," said Norval, with a scowl. "I'll try,
But cannot promise. Wait for me a space."
And off he darted—and an hour went by
While back and forth, with rapid, nervous pace
Lodalga strode; and on his shrunken face
Was that sharp anguish, worse than wounding steel,
Which the lone self-afflicting soul may feel.

Then, after long-drawn torments of delay,
Norval returned, and, with a hopeful smile,
Murmured, "Come, follow me, I've found a way.
I've seen the king's high steward; and, by guile,
Have gained some garments you may give a trial.
These, with a blade to shear your face and head,
I've safely hid in yonder camel shed."

It was a new Lodalga that emerged
In crimson gown, once more a monarch's son,
As though the frills and periwig had purged
His life of all unkingly deeds he'd done.
Cringe low, you sentries!—he need bow to none!—
His cloak was silk, a sword hung at his side,
And velvet head-dress capped his sovereign pride.

Boldly, and with sedate and haughty mien,
He hastened where drawn lances had beset
Only an hour before!—now duke or queen
Could scarce have matched the reverence that he
met.
The sabres which had flashed an evil threat
Were raised in homage; and a fawning corps
Of sentinels swung wide the palace door.

V

There was a darkness in the royal room
That shuttered casements could not quite create.
Dim tapers flared; and in an ashen gloom
The phantom-gray attendants stood in wait,
While some gaunt shadow—like close-hovering
Fate—
Stalked over all, with greedy arms outspread
For one that moaned and muttered on the bed.

Restless he lay, with spectral-glaring eyes
And cup-like sockets, blue and crater-deep,
Gaping as though at undiscovered skies
Beyond the fast-approaching shore of sleep.
And ghastly finger-prints appeared to creep
Along the drawn white chin and brow, and trace
The leer of Death upon the bony face.

Silence like chill foreboding overhung
The violet canopies and marble hall,
Save when, with sagging lips and parching tongue,
The sick man groaned, or, faltering, tried to call
That he was cold, and waiting lord and thrall
Darted to do his bidding. . . . Time went by
Slowly as though the very world must die.

For hours the king had mumbled not a word,
But, scarcely breathing, lay inert as wood,
Till at the door a sudden stir was heard,
And in the light a looming stranger stood.
"A prince would like to see you, if he could,"
Murmured a courtier, meekly. "It is clear
That some momentous mission brings him here."

"I speak with none!" the monarch muttered low.
"Let him who loves a dungeon disobey!"
And, with a sigh, he turned his gaze away,
Yet did not hear the late arrival go.
But weirdly, in the wavering candle glow,
He saw a tall form tower, like a shade
That his vain prayers and mocking hopes had made.

And two deep eyes were fixed upon his own,
And two great arms were raised in mute distress,
And on the luminous face a strange light shone,
And lips, fast-clenched, were struggling to repress
Tears of despair; while trembling eagerness
Shook the tense shape. Though peering through a haze,
King Helmud watched with fascinated gaze.

And long he stared and stared, until it seemed
That flickering phantoms of the years gone by
Gathered to jeer and flout him while he dreamed.
But what was that—that murmured, anguished cry?
"Father!"—and did his senses merely lie?
"Father!"—and at that word his icy hands
Swayed in a grip like that of iron bands.

"Father!"—and need he longer doubt or fear?—
The light came back into his clouded mind,
An angel chorus sounded in his ear,
And he forgot the wounding days behind.
"My son, Lodalga!—surely I was blind
Not to observe you!" And his withered face
Grew moist, his frail arms met a fierce embrace.

Then a low thankful sobbing racked his frame,
And on his cheeks a hectic crimson burned.
"My son, it was so long before you came,
Though many a time I dreamt you had returned
And won anew the father's love you spurned.
Where did you go?—and why, these many years,
Leave us to failing hopes and sterile fears?"

Here the old man stopped short, with panting breast
And lungs that gasped and vainly gasped for air.
But passion blazed, and would not be repressed,
And heedless of his pleading son's despair
And shuddering councillors entreating care,
He struggled to resume, "What matter now
Where you have been?—but make to-day one vow,

"And I'll forgive the heartache and the wrong
Of all the iron and remorseless days.
Only one vow—the time cannot be long.
Grant me that, when I seek the shadowed ways,
I may remember you with joy and praise."
"What vow, my father?" asked the moist-cheeked son.
"Speak, and I swear your bidding shall be done!"

"The empire wanes," King Helmud slowly said.
"Your pleasure-softened brothers fawn and fight
To win the crown—yet for the kingdom's head
There is but one firm-sceptered hand in sight.
The throne is yours by duty and by right,
My eldest son—so take it while you can
And let me die a well-contented man."

Lodalga heard in silence; and the king,
Waxing more eager, sat erect in bed,
With frail arms lifted. "Promise but this thing:
You'll hunt no more chimeras, but, instead,
Will dwell in court, and rule when I am dead.
Grant but this boon!" And his disconsolate plea
Glared from his bloodshot eyes despondently.

But still, with lips compressed and furrowed brow,
Lodalga stared, and did not make reply.
The king's hand trembled. "Come—one vow—
one vow!"
He begged, and with a deep, half-moaning sigh
Sank back upon his couch. And every eye
Flashed horror, when he gave a shivering start
And clutched with desperate fingers at his heart.

"I promise, father—hear, I promise all!"
Lodalga cried—and, with a smothered groan,
"I promise!"—But could frenzied words recall
The soul fast-leaving for some ampler zone?
The stricken man grew still; and, lying prone
On the dishevelled sheets, he faintly spoke,
"Bless you, my son . . . respect the kingly cloak. . . .

"Bless you . . . my son—" The murmur trailed away
Into the dark; and shuddery tremors smote
The wasted frame; and from the unbared throat
Strange rattlings rose—then stiff and still he lay.
The watchers gasped; a few began to pray,
While, with convulsive moans, one mourner knelt,
Grasping that crumpled form, which neither saw nor felt.

PART VI

DISENCHANTMENT

I

The reign of King Lodalga was renowned
For golden flowering of a thousand arts,
Though rarely, in his realm, one heard the sound
Of clashing sabres; and not many hearts
Were torn or twisted by the battle darts.
And since he seemed but poorly versed in war,
He was a king not held in widespread awe.

Had he been governed by the council room
And not believed that tears and blood were vain
When, sending fifty thousand men to doom
With bugles blaring triumph, one can gain
Less than the hand of friendship might attain—
Then, truly, he had sagely led the State,
And doting subjects would have called him great.

And had he headed some rapacious band
To save the kingdom from its smaller foes,
And driven happy peoples from their land,
Slain babes and women with victorious bows
And left but ruins where had bloomed the rose—
Then fond disciples might have reared a shrine
Inscribed to "King Lodalga, the Divine."

But all his ways, alas! were ways of peace.
He bade his craftiest diplomats retire,
Gave orders that triumphal pageants cease,
And favored in their place the harp and lyre.
No roving minstrel need in vain require
The royal patronage; no bard need fear
A grudging welcome from the kingly ear.

But scribes made many books, and painters flourished
As never in this sordid world before.
And dreamers of immortal dreams were cherished,
And beauty whispered songs at every door
Till men were kinder, happier than of yore.
And yet Lodalga's rule, for all these gains,
Had not the glory of more sanguine reigns.

The king, men said, had grievous faults that gave
Plebeian looks to many a royal deed.
He would not let the flags and pennants wave
When he went forth upon his white-plumed steed.
He would not govern by an iron creed,
Nor bid the people, trembling at his nod,
Rear him an altar, bow to him as god.

But he was friend to all—and slave and priest,
Merchant and beggar, were as one to him;
And once he honored, at a palace feast,
Two vagabonds that made his eyes grow dim
By picturing peaks beyond the sunset's rim;
And once men saw him ambling through the town,
Jesting with peasants . . . in a peasant's gown.

Wise were the laws he gave—and few denied
The poor groaned less beneath the masters' yoke,
The strong were less contemptuous in their pride
Than when his fathers wore the royal cloak.
And he was kind and just—yet how invoke
His name with that awed reverence one would
grant
To him with heart of steel or adamant?

What was he really like—this humble king
For whom the crown appeared a leaden weight,
For whom the flowers and the fields of spring
Had deeper glory than the deeds of state?
Often, in gilded throne-rooms of the great
And grass-roofed huts of herdsmen, Rumor stalked,
And with fast-babbling tongues the gossips talked.

And it was bruited that Lodalga's life
Was overcast by many a sullen cloud.
Some said he had a vixen queen for wife,
Shallow as dregs and hence superbly proud.
And some, with sly, half-covered lips, avowed
He wed—with protests—but to gain an heir,
And loved his spouse as mussels love the air.

And others, telling how the king at night
Would haunt alone the palace parapet,
Whispered that on his face there shone a light
As of deep-smoldering sorrow or regret;
And some remarked that once his eyes were wet
When he described a mystic pool that lay
Beyond appalling mountains, far away.

And it was known that curious words at times
Poured from the ruler's lips; that he would speak
Wistfully of remote, enchanted climes
And world-revealing heights for youth to seek
Beneath the dome of some snow-buttressed peak.
And, had Lodalga not been velvet-clad,
He might have seemed fanatical or mad.

II

What could men know of those dark fires that burned
Under the breast that bore the kingly star?—
Of that impassioned heart, which turned and turned,
Hopelessly fettered, unto crags afar?
No falcon ever caged by iron bar
Beat fiercer wings at thought of freedom flown
Than did this monarch shackled to a throne.

Caught like a vassal, powerless to escape!—
Year after year his futile breath might last,
Yet he must place a funeral wreath and crape
Over the murdered raptures of the past.
Youth, and youth's aspirations, must be cast
Into a smothering flood, and he must be
Dungeoned in pomp and steel-clad dignity.

For how can one that wields a royal rod
And hears an empire's jangling fears and cares,
Do homage to some mountain-shadowed god
Or set a foot on starry thoroughfares?
The din of querulous needs and small despairs
Must fill his ears; the grime of street and mart
Must form in smothering cobwebs round his heart.

And though he once ascended snow-tipped skies
And perched on crags where eagles came to rest,
He must become as millions that despise
The gainless striving and the forlorn quest,—
Save when faint memories murmur in his breast,
And half revive, above the bawling throng,
The torturing sweetness of some old, lost song.

Deeply Lodalga rued his lofty rank.—
As one that, slipping on a mountainside,
Clutches a glassy rock's projecting flank
In vain!—then sees the chasm opening wide,
And, helpless, feels himself begin to slide,—
So did the king, on some abysmal slope,
Stumble, and lift fierce arms in fruitless hope.

At times it struck him that some ghostly hand
Reached from the dark to pull him down to doom.
And ghostly tongues gave many a stern command,
And Helmud's voice, far-echoing from the tomb,
Muttered that cloud-aspiring peaks must loom
For him no more!—And thus his life was cast
Into stout fetters by the phantom past.

But as the years went by, the king would yearn
Less often for those crags withdrawn from him.
And if at times regretful fires would burn,
They flashed less hotly, and their rays were dim.
And all his thoughts grew cynical and grim,
And in a dreary philosophic vein
He courted solace for his lingering pain:

"I sought to light a lamp that could not shine,
I sought to rear a citadel in air.
No other eyes can gaze upon the shrine,
No other feet ascend the glacial stair.
I pleaded to a world which did not care,
And if I preached a hundred thousand years,
Men still would turn from me with muffled ears.

"What though my fellows dare not mount the peak
Or catch the glamorous vision I have caught?
They may be happier not to strive or seek,
But, like wise oxen, leave the fight unfought,
Nor fish in seas of doubt for pearls of thought. . . .
Earthworms that tunnel blindly through the night
May be more blessèd not to see the light."

Thus would Lodalga muse, when wakening dawn
Burnt a red taper in the misty sky,
Or when the blinding veils of day were drawn
Back from the stars, which glided meekly by
Like prophets of a truth that cannot die.
And in this hopeless mood, he grew resigned
To leave the haunting, ruined past behind,—

Resigned to lolling in a marble seat,
Watching the years stalk by in slow parade,
While counting figures of the nation's trade
Or of the season's yield of flax or wheat,
Or planning how, with pomp and pose, to greet
A royal guest, or how a border feud
Might be restrained, or lawless tribes subdued.

And such gray tasks he mastered with that skill
And faithful plodding given to kings and slaves
When the wild heart is bridled by the will
And the torn mind eschews the bourn it craves.
The vision of the sunset-glimmering waves
On far snow-pinnacles, but seldom came
To stir his pulse and set his soul aflame.

And as the cold, unlifting fogs of time
Closed on horizons he could not regain,
He half forgot the spurs that bade him climb
To the white summit; and he clutched in vain
At some forgotten doorway in his brain,
Trying to find the path his feet had pressed
To the strange Knowledge on the mountain's crest.

The secret had dissolved in cloud and night!
He could not picture what his eyes had seen!—
Only that he had glimpsed immortal light
Which, ghost-like, faded in the years between!
What were those truths that he had thought to glean
From the still waters? had they been no more
Than wind-marks printed on a sandy shore?

Gone!—and he was as one that never gazed,
In the lone star-time, at a twinkling lake.
Those heaven-enfolding raptures which had blazed,
Those glimpses into beauty that would make
Music to soothe the weltering doubt and ache
Of every mortal heart—these had been lost
Like foam-flecks where the ocean moaned and tossed.

And forty years dragged by—dark-gathering years
That shed distorting shadows on the past.
And in the drab perplexities and fears,
The plots and bickerings that overcast
His courtly life, Lodalga came at last
Not only to believe the vision fled
But scarcely to lament that it was dead.

Forty long years dragged by—their crooked hands
Had shaped the monarch with an iron hold.
His glistening eyes burned softer than of old
Above a beard traversed by granite bands;
While his scarred face, whereon a thousand brands
Had scorched an imprint, seemed the glowering
mask
Of one resigned to some heartrending task.

Forty gray years!—old age was gaping wide,
And Destiny, close-ambushed, lay in wait.
The king was growing weary, and he sighed
To ease his shoulders ere it grew too late.
Too long his hands had grasped the steel of state,
Too long!—and he was tired—and he yearned
For that release his jeweled chains had earned.

DISENCHANTMENT

A few more fights, a few more gilded schemes,
A few more sips of honey or of gall,
A few more hungerings and desert dreams,
And then the certain end—and was that all?
And would his fate be that which must befall
The earthworm and the spider?—What the gain
From the salt years of all his bitter reign?

Barren, more barren than a wind-blown beach,
This life where once had bloomed luxuriant flowers,
This life that, long before, had seemed to reach
Beyond the vale of mortal days and hours
To the white splendor of the mountain towers
And blue eternity!—He had but slaved
To blaze his handmark where the billows raved;

And many another, perishing unsought,
Might have been found more worthy of the throne,
While he, amid the vapors of the court,
Had lost the vision that his youth had known. . . .
And yet—and yet—could he not still atone?
Oh, by renouncing sceptered mien and might,
Could he not still regain the faded light?

Oh, could he not ascend the peak once more
And peer again into the mirrored blue,
To read the secrets he had read before,
And, in lone worship, fill his life anew
From those deep wells whereon the ages drew?
Strange thoughts and sad!—but thus the sting and ache
Of empty years made ancient hopes awake.

And pleading ghosts of his dead youth arose
And bade him take the far, abandoned trail.
And he had glimpses of the moonlit snows,
And heard again the lashing of the gale,
And, far below, beheld the blue-shored vale.
And day by day the teasing thought came back
That he must tread once more a highland track.

III

Yet he might but have planned and vainly planned
With the slow pulse of age that will not dare,
And his dimmed eyes would not again have scanned
The jagged white-domes curving high in air;
But with blunt fingers clutching in despair
At marble walls, he would have lived and died,—
Had not a weird dream prodded and defied.

DISENCHANTMENT

It seemed he sat upon a rose-wreathed throne,
Where mummers danced and tasselled slaves bowed
down;
When, high above, two eyeless sockets shone
Out of a shadowy skull; two hands of bone
Reached slowly toward him, fumbling for his
crown.
And a faint cackling laughter, echo-thin,
Came to his ears above the revelers' din.

Then, as the ghastly, jointed arms drew near,
And he, in horror, could not move nor speak,
And the orbless eye-holes gaped with evil leer,
And he felt cold fingers on his throat and cheek,
And from the fleshless lips an eerie shriek
Shrilled in chill menace—suddenly a screen
Was lifted from the dread and deathly scene;

The skeleton arms were gone, the monstrous face
Had vanished, and the throne-room passed from
sight;
But moonlit waters glimmered in their place,
And gray crags shouldered high into the night;
And on the topmost ledge there gleamed a light
Like a wind-shaken torch; it waved and glowed
As though to show some wandering soul the road.

It waved and glowed; and by its flickering rays
Two mild blue woman's eyes began to shine,
Aloof above the swirl of earthly days
In pleading reverence to some starry shrine.
And womanly arms were lifted as a sign
To mount and follow; and there came a voice:
"The palace or the peak—yours still to make the
choice."

PART VII

THE FINAL QUEST

The choice was made—Lodalga trudged once more
The sweaty, clamorous highway of the plain,
As he had trudged it fifty years before
When, as a youth, he hungered to attain
The far horizon, and the clouds' domain.
But though his face still had a wistful glow,
His back was stooping, and his gait was slow.

Garbed in a nomad's mud-caked flannel gown,
With dangling knapsack and with tight-gripped
rod,
He did not look like one to claim a crown;
But through the hollows of a rain-drenched sod
Or over sandy barrens he would plod
Disconsolate-eyed, with plaintive voice that pled
Often in vain to win a beggar's bread.

Not seldom, when the bleeding sun would set
Beyond the brown fields, in a crimson void,
He would remember—scarcely with regret—
How his imperial staff had been destroyed.
He would recall the ruses he employed
When, with a gypsy turban for disguise,
He had escaped beneath the sentries' eyes,—

Escaped, as in remote and sturdier days,
Taking the path his youthful feet had known,
While, where the gilded lamps shed brazen rays,
His eager son would pose upon the throne. . . .
The lock was turned, the fatal seed was sown;
And, as he passed the royal gate, he knew
The key had slipped forever from his view.

A crownless monarch, veiled and mourned as dead!—
Daily the leagues grew further from the court;
Daily, with blistered feet, he pressed ahead
Nearer the snowy sky-line that he sought.
And months went by—it seemed he had re-fought
Half the sad battles of forgotten years
In thorns and mire, and with his shadowy fears,

In thorns and mire, and on the houseless road,
With wild beasts, brigands, and his own remorse. . . .
And other months went by . . . Lodalga strode
To the dim west on an unswerving course.
At times his fluttering will had lost its force,
At times he strained and stumbled—but his eyes
Still turned in longing to the sunset skies.

For still he dreamt the clouded peak would make
His days resplendent with a mellowing light;
And with high visions of the mountain lake
He warmed his chilly heart, and found the might
To stagger onward, till at last the sight
Of far blue ranges bade the fires of hope
Burn fiercely, and he swore to dare the slope.

And once again he took a sinuous path
Under the curve of stolid peak and crag,
Where storm-gales whipped and pelted in shrill wrath,
And, on some soggy grade, his feet would drag
And he would falter like a wounded stag,
Longing to lie, stone-silent, on the floor
Of the soft snow, and yearn and dream no more.

But still some ember from his fading strength
Shone in his heart, and with that power which flows
From the unconquered mind, he came at length
To where, amid the never-melting snows,
A well remembered, lonely peak arose,
Eternal Kungla!—on whose icy spire
Shimmered the waters of his life's desire.

All was unchanged!—And when in youth he came
With anguished heart to keep a self-made vow,
Those battered rocky bastions were the same,
The same woods glowered from the mountain's brow.
All was unchanged—except that winter now
Mantled the world; and not alone the height
But many a deep-cut vale was cloaked in white.

Long and forlornly King Lodalga stared
At that bold peak where timeless grandeur shone.
And hours had drifted by before he dared
To set his footprints on those steps of stone.
Then, like a man who ventures forth alone
Expecting to return not, he essayed
The long ascent, with spirit half afraid.

Yet a fresh ardor filled his wasted heart,
And through his veins the blood more quickly flowed.
And he was stirred by part, though only part
Of those fierce transports which in youth had glowed
And held him to the friendless, vacant road.
And in his breast a voice still seemed to call:
"The peak, the peak!—You must not fail nor fall!"

THE FINAL QUEST

Step by worn step, as in the days long dead,
He struggled up the winding lava lane,
With limbs that sagged, and trembling feet that bled,
And tortured mind that battled to retain
A sanguine mood, while anxious eyes would strain
Ceaselessly to that tapering far-off cone
Where the immortal radiant waters shone.

Slow was his gait; his breath came short and fast;
Often he sought the forest floor for rest.—
And should some snow-drift be his tomb at last,
Ten thousand paces from the wind-blown crest?
Sometimes, when shrieking, shivering gales oppressed
Or writhing floods impeded, it would seem
The pool was but the figment of a dream.

And sometimes, when he fought his slippery way
Up ice-caked ledges, grappling for a hold,
Or over misty cliffs that seemed to say,
"There is no passage here for one so old,"
Then he would feel that he was over-bold
To dare the perilous summit, and would long
For those safe highroads trodden by the throng.

But his was now a path of no returning!—
The peak before him, and the open sky,
He could but bow before the master yearning
To gain the pool, or, seeking it, to die.
Up, up he trudged, with many a groan and sigh,
And up and up, now slower, slower still,
With reeling limbs, and stern but staggering will.

By night he sought some cavern's black recess
Where once the panther may have nursed her brood;
Or else upon some frozen solitude
Or pine-fringed glade or timbered wilderness
Where the wild wind went by in weeping mood,
He lit his campfire; then would sadly creep
Under his bearskin robe for fitful sleep.

Five days drew past, and lengthened into ten,
Ten days of warfare with the mire and snow,
Ten days of heartache, ere he reached again
The last ascent beneath that high plateau
Where smiled the waters he had pined to know.
But now he lacked the courage of his prime
And his worn limbs had scarce the strength to climb.

Blocked!—and it seemed there was no way to rise,
Except, with bursting heart and struggling breath,
To take the way of daring and of death.
Long, with distraction in his frenzied eyes,
Lodalga stared, imploring, at the skies,
Which did not heed nor answer; and at length
He might have staked his final dram of strength,

And faced the rock, and fallen, and have known
The eternal ice of some profound crevasse;
But as he started toward those walls of stone,
He saw, beneath the jutting granite mass,
A rude and dim-marked stair that seemed to pass
Over the cliff, as though benignly planned
For weary climbers by some human hand.

Another hour's grappling with the slope,
And he might walk beside the pool once more!—
Yet, like the sneering murderer of hope,
A freezing wind began to screech and roar;
And down upon him, like a cloud, there bore
The demon-tempered legions of the snow,
As if to warn, "Make haste, make haste below!"

Then must he perish, or turn back and fail?
Must he, within a hand's grasp of his mark,
Falter, and let the talons of the gale
Buffet him feather-like into the dark?
He must not, must not pause!—some vivid spark
From the old perished fires came flaring back
And held him to the hard, wind-challenged track.

And though the snow piled high, he forged a course
Through the white void, a gray, snail-crawling form,
With tottering frame that barely had the force
To breast the persecutions of the storm.
It was some inner flame that kept him warm
Amid those frozen steeps; some inner light
Gave to his failing limbs an alien might;

And with a strength replenished from his will
And that desire which cannot brook defeat,
He panted up the craggy stairway still,
His heart protesting with fierce, skipping beat,
His spirit feverish with some blazing heat
That pressed him on and on. . . . And now at last
The snow-storm ceased, the clouds themselves were passed;

And night came on—but with the night it seemed
Another stride would lift him to his goal.
Upon the snow the moonlight wanly beamed,
And cast a weird reflection in his soul
With its white rays . . . when suddenly the whole
Of his long climb was done. He stood once more
On that plateau recalled from long before,

On that plateau, beneath the glacial cone,
Where flashed the blue lake of immortal light.—
But where—where was that glory he had known?
Where was the pool?—Had he turned dull of sight?—
Were there no waters sparkling crystal-bright
In the grave star-glow? Surely, he was blind,
And veiling vapors had befogged his mind,

And blurred his senses, for he gaped in vain,
Bewildered, and his blinking eyes could see
Only the snow-banks curving drearily
To the bare cliff-walls of a narrow plain.
And sharp ice glittered in malicious glee,
With impish points of laughter; and the gale
Derisively began to scream and wail.

Half-dazed he watched, and, watching, almost
thought
His wavering pulse would flutter out and stop.
The dim-remembered waters he had sought
Perhaps were on some other mountain top!
Then, in despair, he almost wished to drop
Over the ridge to kind forgetfulness,
And lose his wearying doubts and old distress,

And be enveloped in the mighty peace
That wrapped the mountains like a hood of awe,—
Silent, where trials and hurt desires must cease
Under the sovereignty of dateless law.
And, brooding thus, he stirred a pace, and saw
New apparitions in that shocked surprise
With which a ghost may greet incredulous eyes.

A polished ice-sheet, level as a floor,
Spread in long ambling curves amid the snow.
And on its pallid, desolate face it wore
A luster such as dying eyes may show,—
A glazed and sallow glare, a deathly glow
Caught from the cold and barren moon, whose
rays
It imaged like dead souls of happier days.

THE FINAL QUEST

The pool at last!—the longed-for pool at last!
Its waters frozen, and its radiance flown!
Winter had settled down; the wintry blast
Had turned it lifeless as a pond of stone.
No spectral sea or ice-floe ever shone
With eerier glimmers—and the light it shed
Weighed on Lodalga's heart like driven lead.

At the first glimpse, he heaved a forlorn sigh.—
Where now the ravishing vision he had caught?
The icy stars peeped from an icy sky
As though to mock the grandeur youth had brought.
Too late, too late!—and sudden as a thought
The message came that he no more should view
Lake waters twinkling in the morning blue.

And as the appalling knowledge stabbed his mind,
His heart turned faint, his gasping breath came slow.
Dim vapors gathered, and with eyes half blind
He stumbled from the ice-field's ghastly glo
Then reeled, and plunged headlong into the
While, in remorseless mockery of his pligh
Weird clouds convened like shadows in t

And a loud gale arose, and moaned and moaned
As though in tears for some departed shade.
And calling from far valleys, plaintive-toned,
A melancholy wolf-pack wailed and brayed.
Soon, in the dark, the fluttering snowflakes played,
And the soft arms of the advancing storm
Folded in close white robes a lone, unmoving form.

THE END